Renny Thomas: Prof. Sitpas, let us start by discussing the new course that you are offering at the Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, on nationalism?

Ari Sitas: It’s a course on the histories and theories of nationalism. It attempted to combine actual narratives of nationalism, their emergence and theorising about such movements in a systematic way. I wanted to get students out of the Indian tent and start talking about other anti-colonial and postcolonial experiences through which they could ask new questions in terms of what they are confronting at the moment. So I thought I would take Africa as the focus and deal with Afro-pessimism and prejudice—the images of Africa on TV you saw everyday: refugees, narratives that talk about failed states… failed nation states. Is it colonialism at fault? Is it the failed nation states, is it bad nationalism, good nationalism, is it religion, is it ethnicity?…
Renny Thomas: Isn’t the situation far more complex in Africa compared to India? Could you see any similarities or parallels?

Ari Sitas: There are enormous similarities and enormous differences. I think the similarity was historical...there are linkages to the South African story and beyond, because at a certain point a diminutive lawyer arrived in Durban and started an Indian Congress, and started non-violent campaigns there. And African nationalists who were defined as natives and were rebelling against the definition decided to form at first a Native Congress, and then after reflection on the word Native, started the African Congress when they were excluded racially from the emerging union of South Africa. In a sense the story of India and South Africa gets close there, but then it travels: if you take away Gandhi’s philosophy of being, and look at his philosophy of praxis, it travels to Nkrumah, it travels to Kenyatta, it travels to Nyerere, who believe now that they belong to a family of nationalists whose strategies combine militant but peaceful processes. So there is kinship there...